

The telephone must not become another spam channel.

The telephone is a lifeline. The telephone companies have buildings full of batteries to keep the phone working during power outages. Many people will still run to the phone from the bathroom or whatever because the call may be important. These people are doing the right thing. If they are sufficiently abused by telemarketers, they will quit answering their phone.

To defend against the telemarketers, some people use an answering machine to screen calls and refuse to answer in person. For these cases, the phone becomes a voicemail, a use more efficiently served by email. If telemarketing is not curtailed, this practice will become more common, and the real-time person-to-person communication that we value will be lost. Some of my friends are unreachable by phone because of this.

The laws that protect fax from this abuse have worked well. We need something like this for telephone. Telemarketers should be required by law to identify themselves as unsolicited callers, and announce what they will pay per minute to the recipient of the call just for listening (payment credits the phone bill like a 900 number with the charges reversed). If the price is right, some people will be pleased to receive a telemarketer's call. As it is now, a telemarketer's call usually makes people angry.

Junk mail and spam email can be processed quickly, and we can do it at a time we choose. Telemarketers interrupt people's lives, and they should pay a fair price for that. A fair price is one that does not leave people angry that they answered their phone. I won't listen for 5 cents, but I might listen for 5 bucks. Other people may make other choices. With a reverse-900 payment system in place, a fair price would soon be known.